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An Interview with Ritu Menon

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AN INTERVIEW WITH RITU MENON

**Robert
Fraser**

Ritu Menon is co-founder of Kali for Women, India's oldest feminist press, and founder-director of Women Unlimited, an associate of Kali for

Women, which between them have published many of the most important texts in women's studies in India. She has written several books, among them the groundbreaking Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition; and edited anthologies of writing by Indian women. She is also founder member of Women's WORLD (International) and Women's WORLD (India), a free-speech network of writers and publishers that works on gender-based censorship across the world. In India, this network has worked with over 250 writers from five South Asian countries. On a chilly morning in December 2005 I travelled to Delhi's southern suburbs to talk to her in her office in Hauz Khas Enclave. Rattling around in my motor rickshaw, I wondered what I might find on my arrival. After all, the goddess Kali, an emanation of Durga, was infamous for her fury. In one of the better-known episodes in Indian legend, she simmers down only when told that, while asserting her legitimate rights, she has succeeded in standing on the recumbent body of her husband, Siva. The age of 'Kali Yuga' too, though etymologically distinct from the name of the goddess, is synonymous with chaos. To my delight, I was met with civility, charm and coffee.

Robert Fraser How long has feminist publishing been going in India? Is it a comparatively recent development?

Ritu Menon It's been around for the last twenty years or so. By 'feminist' I mean something distinctively so — with a *feminist* gender perspective, not just a focus on gender studies or women's studies, which is often the case with mainstream

publishing. It is the political edge which definitely separates the feminist publishers from gender or women's studies publishing, which even the mainstream has begun to do now — after us, after Kali. It's not as though they weren't publishing anthropology, sociology, history and so on before — things to do with women or what were called 'women's issues' — but terms such as 'gender studies' or 'women's studies' actually came about as a consequence of the women's movement worldwide — that is new for mainstream publishing. They have only responded over about the last ten or twelve years, and by mainstream I mean the large academic presses: Sage, OUP, Macmillan India ...

RF So was it necessary for feminist presses to set themselves up to embarrass the mainstream into moving across a bit?

RM I'm not sure it's a question of embarrassing, more of taking a risk. Once we took the risk and proved that it was economically viable, it became safe for them to venture into it. I remember conversations we had with various friends about it because, after all, we came out of mainstream publishing, and they said variously: 'We'd rather you take the risk than us' or 'Where will you find the material?' or 'Is there enough to keep going?' or 'Why do you want to restrict yourselves to something so narrow?' And we said, 'Half the world is not so narrow.'

RF Did they also say, 'Where is the market?'

RM They said, 'There isn't a market', not 'Where is the market?' And we said, 'We think there is a market but it has to be developed.' So the developmental work, which is what feminist publishing worldwide did, was what they weren't

prepared to do: long gestation, slow returns, a huge investment of time and energy. When OUP finally started producing stuff which was called gender or women's studies, we asked them in a sort of joking way why they thought it was now worth doing, and they said 'Well, you know, when Julia Kristeva moves from being a footnote to being part of the text, we obviously have to sit up and take notice.' So it was a kind of admission that not only was it economically safe, but that as academic publishers with a scholarly focus, it was acceptable for them to be doing something that earlier had been slightly suspect in academia; it was a partial view, it was not a discipline, it didn't really have the kind of acceptability or legitimacy of the other social sciences, so would it be okay for them to do it? I mean would it pass muster, as an area of study? It's very much a part of publishing activity now, but the minute it ceases to be economically viable it will cease. It will not continue for them as a political project which is what distinguishes the work of feminist presses, which is excavation basically. We do monographs, pamphlets, activist material, movement-related stuff — every feminist press has been doing this for ages. It's not what a scholarly press would take up. This hasn't come out of scholarly presses, out of the academy. And, of course, we do fiction too.

RF Are there any titles published by Women Unlimited that you are especially proud of?

RM Recently we've brought out *And the World Changed*, a collection of stories by Pakistani women edited by Muneeza Shamsie. This is a stunning collection of stories by twenty-four of the most creative women writers in Pakistan today, all of them remarkable for the range and accomplishment of their writing. Fable, faction, prose-poetry, memoir as social history, autobiography as political commentary: it's all there. Familiar genres are coaxed into new forms, conventional content is upended to excavate experience and memory. This is the first such anthology of such stories, all written originally in English, and it spans three generations of women, and fifty years of Pakistani literature.

RF And a novel?

RM I think I'd mention one that's come out of very recent events. *No Space for Further Burials* is a response to war written in really haunting prose by Feryal Ali Gauhar. It's an astonishingly powerful novel that unfolds the tragedy of post-9/11 Afghanistan. As the characters try to cope with their individual destinies, the terrible madness of the conflict around them is counterpointed against the poignancy of their individual lives, and the narrator's own peculiar predicament. He's a US army medic taken captive by the rebels. We're invited to ask inconvenient questions like: is he the 'victor' or a victim? His ambivalence becomes a metaphor for everything Afghanistan symbolises. And the author makes

clear that there is no winning this war. There is only this ravaged country.

RF Stepping back a little in time now, how strong was the women's movement here in India during the heyday of the 1980s and '90s?

RM Our heyday is now. I mean nowadays ours is one of the strongest movements in the world, even today where, in North America, in Europe it's practically vanished. There it's a shadow of what it used to be in the heyday of the 1970s and '80s. In Western Europe, North America and Britain, it's much less vibrant than it used to be. But in our part of the world, in the South, it's very strong because the issues are so urgent. They continue to be urgent and they are added on to by newer issues, so the old ones haven't gone away and the new ones have piled up on them. The movement can't sit back, the work is not done.

RF I've seen widely different figures for literacy among women in India, mostly suggesting it's somewhere between about ten to twenty per cent less than amongst men. Is that right?

RM About ten to fifteen per cent. It depends, you see, on rural, urban, regional, north, south, east, west. There are big differences. The disparities aren't as great in the south and west, but much greater in the north and northwest. So the regional picture is very different amongst different classes and groups. It's difficult to put general figures on this.

RF Yes, the literacy figures are higher in South India aren't they?

RM Much higher, which means that the disparities are much smaller. But the literacy figures overall for men are much lower in the north and west, and the disparities between men and women are more marked.

RF In all of these official statistics, though, I find there's a tendency not to distinguish between literacy in English and in other languages.

RM No, they don't make those necessary distinctions.

RF It's very confusing.

RM Well, you see the thing is, for English, it's generally agreed that it's only about two per cent of the population ...

RF Who know English at all?

RM Yes, who are familiar with it. Now it could be that the gradation is actually very wide, from a smattering, to conversational use, to actually being literate. The fact is that all higher education is in English – research and science and medicine are in English – so you have a huge range of

English-speaking, English-medium facilities, but the two per cent covers it all. You actually don't know within that how many are simply conversant and how many are fluent and literate.

RF So when you're talking about Indian women reading in English, you are in fact talking about a tiny percentage?

RM Tiny, very small. But you know two per cent of one billion is a lot. You know the thing about percentages is they simply have to be rendered numerically, otherwise they don't have meaning. When they say India has a huge middle class of however many hundred million, it's actually less than ten or twenty per cent of the population, but the numbers are the ones quoted. For literacy, it's the percentages and of course there's always a very good reason for doing both, so people say to us, 'Why do you publish in English? Who reads?'

RF I saw some extraordinary figures the other day suggesting that, amongst literate Indians, more hours are spent per week reading than in Britain or America.

RM That's not surprising. Not everyone has access to electronic media, which is actually where I suppose a lot of people in Britain and North America are doing their reading or their information gathering — you know, the substitute for reading print. Now, that doesn't exist for large sections of the population here, so of course they still do read. Another reason is that in the other Indian languages, reading material is actually quite affordable, so it isn't as though it is inaccessible financially to most people, they do have the possibility of buying and reading. That is not the case in English, but in English there is a completely different class of reader, by-and-large. I mean I can't make a general statement about it, but income levels for the urban middle class are definitely higher than for the urban, semi-urban and small town middle and lower middle classes, which is where the Indian language reading and buying takes place. If you look at the number of bookshops in the country selling English language books, for example, it's pathetic. It's less than a few hundred in the whole country ...

RF And most of them are in Delhi, Kolkata and maybe ...

RM They are in what we call A and B class towns that are graded population-wise. So over a couple of million, then less than a million or a million, or between one and five. Most of the outlets are in those places. So the reality is that, although there may be a lot of people who actually want to read in English, they may not be able to, except perhaps by using libraries. However, the library system is very weak, so the network of libraries is not satisfactory as a source.

RF Apart from traditional booksellers, you've also got little booths and stalls, unofficial outlets, haven't you? I notice in



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Delhi a lot of the places where I would pick up a book aren't actually shops as such.

RM For example?

RF Well, in Connaught Place, round the pavements.

RM Ah yes, but they deal mainly in remaindered stuff. We wouldn't sell there, and I think that very few publishers would do that, only 'merchant importers' who buy books by the weight, by the shipload. It's almost always remaindered or pirated stuff that goes on to the pavements, secondhand books that pavement sellers get from lending libraries or elsewhere. But you would never find any of our books there because they would never be able to sell them. There are a few, what we call, speciality shops, a lot of them are funky, new age-y, they have music, gift items, craft stuff, a coffee shop and they will have a large book section. If you go to Khan Market in Delhi, there is a very successful example called Full Circle, which is actually a new age publisher. They do Buddhist and Paulo Coelho and all that stuff, and they sell scented candles and music, they have an organic food café but also they have this very good bookshop, which is very successful, so there's that kind of combination. Or you have a chain called the Corner Bookstore which has tied up with Barista, the coffee chain. They have a corner of that coffee place, where they sell books. There are two or three others: Crossword, Landmark, Odyssey. These are national chains which all combine their book sales with sales of soft toys, games, greeting cards, stationery. But when I say that there are

less than a few hundred bookshops, I mean just bookshops — they don't do anything else. But it's increasingly difficult now for bookshops to survive without also doing those other things — videos and DVDs and stuff.

RF Could you tell me about the beginnings of Kali for Women? When it got going and how?

RM Well, it got going in 1984 because of two things: the growth of the women's movement, and the introduction of women's studies into the university as a policy that was initiated by the University Grants Commission, to set up women's studies centres and to support them across the country. And the beginnings of this research and activism, a movement that was producing materials with a feminist perspective was distinct from, say, the usual sociology-anthropology studies on family and kinship and goddesses and so on. It separated itself because it was political research. It had its roots in the feminist movement and it was avowedly a movement for progressive social change. Inevitably the publishing that grew out of it has that agenda as well.

RF Did you begin by working for mainstream publishers?

RM Yes, I started with Doubleday in New York, then with Orient Longman here in Delhi, then with Vikas, a large social science publisher. And my colleague, Urvashi Butalia, was with OUP here, then with Zed in London. We both have a very mainstream publishing background.

RF With a lot of expertise.

RM Well, experience I'd say and a whole lot of foolhardy risk-taking energy. A lot of it was luck, because if we were to begin now, it would be a very different landscape — publishing and otherwise. The time was right and we happened to be there at a stage in our careers and in our lives where it was possible to build on the capital that we had from publishing. After all, why would authors come to us if they didn't know who we were and hadn't had that experience of working with us in our previous publishing lives? I think we would have made many mistakes if we had come to it completely raw. So in that sense the experience stood us in very good stead. Because we were the first, we had the advantages as well as the danger or the risks. We had the advantage of actually developing the market and being able to do so because it was something that was beginning to happen, beginning to emerge. Writers certainly wanted a forum, writers who were not being published by the mainstream and for lots of very good reasons. I mean every publisher has their list, their focus, their priorities and this was one of them, but there was no publisher that was only doing feminist publishing, whose list was comprised entirely of writing by and about women, not necessarily only by them, but on them. So through that we were offering a space that was very capacious and very sympathetic. A lot of people

came to us because they too were part of the movement. A lot of them are now with the mainstream, because many women, many feminists, and a lot of academics, go to the mainstream for the same reason that a lot of women get married.

RF Safety?

RM I'd say stability, status and perhaps, security.

RF It must be frustrating for you when you nurture a writer who then flies the nest.

RM Yes, but that happens in the mainstream as well. When people become successful then everyone will court you and that's fine. However, I really see our work, our kind of publishing — increasingly not just feminist but all independent publishing, which includes every small press in the world, anyone who is not part of the conglomerates — as being in the vanguard. Our aim is really to explore, to keep pushing the frontiers, so that we are always in the business of doing new work, of doing the exploration, the innovation, the experimenting, the risk-taking. Once that becomes safe it will go into the mainstream. There are very few writers worldwide who will remain with a press whose politics they share, very few. That's why feminist publishing in the world in general has gone. It doesn't exist anymore. I think there are half a dozen presses left in the world that are autonomous, that are not part of Random House and, you know, Longman Pearson or Taylor & Francis, hardly any. Pandora's finished.

RF You said that you were helped by the fact that the universities were funded to start programmes ...

RM Yes, centres.

RF So at the beginning did you gear your output to syllabi and curricula?

RM No, no. When we started it was not taught, it wasn't a discipline, there was no degree in it except at two colleges in the country. The women's studies centres were set up to provide a space for research that was being done with a gender focus or dimension, but contained within the other disciplines. The thirty-three universities involved were funded by the University Grants Commission, so there was a centre, there was a director of the centre and actually those women's studies centres were supposed to be what was called the 'third arm' of higher education; the first two being teaching and research and the third being activism. If there wasn't that dimension of action-research, then that teaching was incomplete. The centres were intended to provide a combination of teaching, research and activism, so many of them did extension work in the community. They provided legal aid, they provided counselling, they worked within the local community of the university, wherever it was, within the campus, outside the campus, whatever was needed. And to

this day there is no real syllabus in women's studies because there never has been an agreement on whether it should form part of the discipline, whether it should be an essential component in the disciplines, or a separate discipline altogether. And there never has been an agreement because to date Indian academia has not accepted that it *can* be a discipline, because in the view of most academics it doesn't have a disciplinary pedigree. The consultative committees that have been formed to discuss this have never agreed; consequently there isn't a course, so there is no syllabus. There are some recommended texts, if you are doing, say, an MPhil. You can do it at the MPhil or PhD level, but 'recommended' does not mean it's 'prescribed', and the only way that it can be widely discussed is if it's prescribed. That still doesn't happen, except as I say in these two colleges that do offer a Masters in women's studies. They cobble together a syllabus, but it's not part of the university system as a whole, so our publishing could never be geared to that. The interesting thing is that, despite the fact that it is not part of academia, the subject has gained legitimacy and currency, and more and more students are opting for it. So somewhere there has been an intervention, even though it has no formal status.

RF If you were a publisher publishing set books for a syllabus, it might be quite easy to decide your print run because you know how many students are going to take a given course in a given year. Is it rather more difficult for you to calculate?

RM Oh yes, our print runs are always speculative, in the sense that after a while you get to know which kind of book is going to have what kind of likely sales, so you don't over-reach or underestimate. But, because we do a range of materials, from pamphlets and monographs to fiction, autobiographies and memoirs and general interest non-fiction and academic stuff, the print runs vary for each of these.

RF Poetry, do you do poetry?

RM No.

RF It's a greater risk?

RM Yes, it is a greater risk but that's true of poetry publishing everywhere. But it's also because we publish mainly in English and there's not that much good poetry in English. All our fiction – a good ninety per cent of it – is translated into English from other languages. But poetry translations are very difficult. It's difficult enough for prose and fiction, but poetry is another order of skill altogether. So we might have done it if the material were more easily available, but as things stand, it will take a while for that skill to develop.

RF What would your print run tend to be for a monograph?

RM It would depend on the author and the subject. We export quite a lot and we print and provide finished copies, so it would depend on whether we had an export sale on it as well — so it could be anything from, say, 750 copies to 3,000.

RF Do you export in collaboration with foreign concerns?

RM Yes, we co-publish with Zed, Verso, with the Women's Press when it was the Women's Press, with the Feminist Press, with university presses in North America, with Rutgers, Michigan, Wisconsin and Chicago, Westview, Rowman and Littlefield. We co-publish with several and we print for them or they buy rights from us.

RF When you say that you print for them, if they are doing an academic title of their own, do you see to the printing this end?

RM Well, we originate — they buy from us and we provide them with finished copies.

RF So is all the technical work done in India?

RM Not just technical, all the editorial work and the developmental work is done here. The commissioning is done here. So they buy the title from us. And we buy from them, when there is a title that's of interest to us.

RF Presumably there's a difference in pricing policy between your books and theirs?

RM Well they price what they price. Our edition does not sell in that market, so that market is closed.

RF Is that for copyright reasons?

RM No, that's how markets are divided up. I mean we sell the territory. So let's say I have a title here which Zed wants to buy for the UK and the Commonwealth, we sell them the rights for that market, but the North American market is still open, so we will sell to a North American publisher and that might include Canada or it might not. And each of these markets is an exclusive market. In other words, Zed or a UK publisher cannot sell their edition in the US, the American publisher cannot sell their edition in the UK and the Commonwealth. We can't sell in either of those markets and they can't sell in our market. These are the exclusive sales which are called 'territories'. And if we were to sell that title in Europe, we would sell its translation rights. We might, say, sell French rights for France and Francophone North Africa; or Spanish for Spain and Latin America, or we might sell only to Spain, it all depends.

RF And would, say, Nigeria come under Britain and the Commonwealth?

RM Only if the British want it. We do not sell directly to Africa because export regulations in India are very rigid, and if you default on receipts your export licence is revoked, which means you cannot export. The remittance guidelines are so strict that if your buyer defaults, you are held liable.

RF For all that, it seems to be that there's a mutual fascination between Africa and India.

RM You know, there is and there isn't. I can speak for India. India is a very racist country and our fascination for Africa remains purely at an academic level. We have no interest at all in the society and the people, the culture, or its politics. You will find smatterings of interest in some urban areas, but by and large no, we are not even interested in the Indians in Africa, the Indians of South Africa or East Africa — this is a very, very self-satisfied, racist society, and we are racist even within the country, so of course, outside the country it is much more evident.

RF Is there any way that a publisher can break that down?

RM Not unless we're funded. We're very happy to sell our books there. And you will find any number of Indian publishers selling stuff by the shipload — colouring books and alphabet books, even some textbooks, you know all of that material which is produced at virtually throw-away prices, as an alternative to Heinemann, Macmillan, Longman, all the erstwhile colonial publishers. That has been happening and continues to happen, because deals are entered into with governments, so it's mutually beneficial. But for a small publisher like us, it's practically impossible, and of course the subsidiaries of colonial publishing will not go there because that market is with the parent company.

RF So you were one of the co-founders of Kali for Women but you've now set up your own independent concern?

RM Well, it's an imprint, it's a subsidiary of Kali. Both Zubaan and Women Unlimited have set up on our own, but Kali still exists and half the titles are still Kali titles. There are now two associate organisations as well as the parent list. Zubaan and Women Unlimited are both continuing to do the kind of publishing that we were doing as Kali, but with new areas as well: children's, young adults, picture books, literacy material, pamphlets, more and more pamphlets, perhaps.

RF Do you do all-India distributions?

RM No, no, we can't, it's too large a country. We have been using several distributors because distributors have different areas of strength, some are better in different parts of the country. We have never used an exclusive distributor. We use the NGO network a lot, that is alternative channels of distribution because a lot of our readership is in that sector, but as of a couple of months ago — because distribution is

actually the least satisfactory part of publishing in India — eight of us have got together and started our own distribution collective and we are now distributing ourselves. We are eight small to medium presses and between us I think we probably publish the best social science, feminist and children's books in the country. We now have about 400 to 500 titles that we distribute. This is a very new thing because it's not something either the mainstream or the small presses have ever done, not in India at least. So let's see where that takes us.

RF Are there uneven patterns of distribution across the country — the south and the north?

RM Very uneven. Again it depends on the kind of book. You see, retail sales are a very different thing from institutional sales. In India a lot of academic publishing is geared to institutional buying because that is funded by the government. Retail is individual sale, that's mass market, or trade. Let's say part of our list goes to trade, the academic stuff goes to institutions. We would have to use one kind of distributor for retail and another for institutional because they go to two very different markets. Their sales reps, who would be very good in one area, would probably not be as good in another. If we put all our eggs into one basket we probably wouldn't be as well served as we should be. It's a fairly complicated kind of segmentation of the market, but the real problem is that you would think in a country this size with, let's say, 6,000 institutions of higher learning, that our print runs would be much larger than they are. They aren't. Part of the reason is the competition from imported books, which obviously most of the distributors are much happier to deal with because the margins are much higher, but part of it is to do with the fact that distribution is actually very unsatisfactory in India. It requires huge capital investment and distributors haven't really taken it up seriously. I think that the main reason is that, as a business, it isn't attractive enough for the big guys. You see, all educational publishing is state controlled, so rolling finance, which is what underpins general publishing, is not available. It's a very risky business.

RF If I wanted to buy one of your academic monographs, how much would I have to spend?

RM It depends on the print run and on the number of pages. The rough rule of thumb is that the price of a book is one rupee per page — so, if it's a 300-page book it would be between 300 and 350 rupees.

RF That's really cheap. Around four pounds — a tenth of the price in the West. A British monograph nowadays markets at around forty quid.

RM Yes, it is cheap, which is why the demand for outsourcing of print services to India, especially from Britain is very high, and of course the print quality now is comparable. So Zed, for

instance, buy from us quite often, and they buy finished copies because they don't need to do any of the developmental or production work which is labour intensive and expensive. But when print runs are smaller than 1,000 copies – which is when you break even at half the print run – if your run is lower than that, then a 350-page book might actually sell for 450 or 475 rupees. Also commissions to distributors are going up, so the pricing is as well. But people like us have to price our books with the reader in mind, the potential buyer, not the distributor!

RF This must mean that your profit margin is tiny.

RM It's much lower than it should be, because our royalties are paid on gross, not on net, and our discount to distributors can be anywhere between thirty-five to fifty per cent.

RF Do you offer advances to your authors?

RM No. Very few publishers here do. It's not because we don't want to support writing and research, it's because there's no guarantee that you'll actually get the work. Also, we can't really afford to tie up money for an indefinite period.

RF Yes of course.

RM So that's the main reason. Also, women are usually very hard pressed, women academics included, to actually keep to deadlines, to be able to make that commitment and fulfil it. We have projects that go on for five or seven years, but we continue to support the authors in whichever way we can but not necessarily by paying them in advance.

RF Are you prepared to carry a title by virtue – if you're absolutely convinced – of its merit?

RM Of course, half our titles are just that. I'd say fifty per cent of our titles are the ones that we carry; in time they will pay for themselves. We also know that we are about ten years ahead of a title's currency, usually, because, as I say, we are interested in exploring new areas of research. New areas take a while before they become part of common currency, which means that our books remain in print for a very long time. We don't retire our books.

RF You don't pulp?

RM We never pulp, and we keep books in print for as long as we can, as long as there's even a small demand for them. We might reprint in small quantities and that is because, as I say, the issues gain currency long afterwards. Our first book, in 1985, was on women, religion and development. It's an issue that has come up again and again and again. One of the earliest books we did was on women and Islam. We continue to sell it in the hundreds today, because the issue

is in the forefront now. One of the important things about feminist studies or gender issues is that the issues don't go away that easily. Because they don't go away easily, the books are always current.

RF This is very impressive because in the UK market titles are often pulped, after six months in some cases.

RM Well, that's a compulsion of the mainstream, and I understand it very well because if you're producing 200 books a year you really cannot afford to keep the ones that sell only fifty or 100 copies ...

RF Because of warehouse space?

RM Because of warehousing, but also because a return on investment is a very important factor. If you're publishing only twenty books a year, it is possible to do that. You know that if the twenty books continue to remain in print – which means of course that they are selling – that they have earned their way many times over. Plus, we sell rights. With fiction I might sell the same book five times over, so even if it sells much less here than it should, it's sold three or more times over somewhere else. It's the same book.

RF Presumably you sell multiple translations? What is the greatest number of languages that any of your titles have been in?

RM About ten, I think. It was one of Vandana Shiva's first books called *Staying Alive*, on women, development and the environment. It was the first book published on the subject anywhere in the South. It has been published in at least ten languages, including Japanese and Korean.

RF So is the world your oyster? Do you distribute, for example, around the rest of South Asia?

RM We can't actually. We don't have a trade treaty with Pakistan for instance, so we can't sell anything there, although we do co-publish with Pakistan.

RF Burma? I suppose not.

RM Burma probably wouldn't buy in English – very little – and in Thailand, maybe not at all. Malaysia, Singapore, very little, only our fiction and general interest titles, perhaps ...

RF Sri Lanka?

RM In Sri Lanka we co-publish with a couple of publishers, and of course we sell there as well.

RF Ritu Menon, thank you very much.